

Reds in the White House

BY WILLIAM P. HOAR

The Venona Secrets: Exposing Soviet Espionage and America's Traitors, by Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel. Regnery, 608 pages, \$29.95

WE MUST RESORT TO ALL SORTS OF stratagems, maneuvers, illegal methods, evasions, and subterfuge...to carry on Communist work," Lenin wrote in 1920.

You can't say we weren't warned. Yet Americans have hardly faced up to the amazing extent of Soviet penetration in the succeeding decades into all areas of our national life, especially their infiltration of the highest levels of U.S. government.

The Venona Secrets is one of several new books on Communist espionage written following the release, beginning in 1995, of previously classified coded cables from the 1940s between Moscow and Soviet agents in the United States. Although much of the decryption in the code-breaking effort that became known as Venona occurred before 1952, efforts at further cracking the traffic lasted until 1980. Researchers lately have compared this material with formerly top-secret records in Moscow also made available in recent years.

Liberals don't like what the Venona transcripts have confirmed: that Alger Hiss secretly received Soviet medals for his Yalta-related work as well as the thanks of military intelli-

gence in Moscow; that Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley — the much-maligned former communists who turned against their comrades — were telling the truth; and yes, that the Rosenbergs were guilty as charged.

The Venona Secrets reviews a substantial number of these cases, ably interpreted by authors Herbert Romerstein, who was a professional member of the House Intelligence Committee and House Committee on Un-American Activities and later head of the Office to Counter Soviet Disinformation at the U.S. Information Agency, and the late Eric Breindel, the editorial page editor of the *New York Post* when he died in 1998. Unlike the authors of some of the competing academic histories, Romerstein and Breindel do not pull punches by trying to be non-judgmental — a major plus, since it really shouldn't hurt one's credibility to take a position against treason. They also surpass their competitors by going into greater detail about how the Soviet infiltrators operated.

The stakes in Cold War espionage were hardly small. Venona and other recent disclosures, as Romerstein and Breindel note, reveal that Stalin actually knew about the Manhattan Project before Harry Truman did. Soviet intelligence "was regularly reporting to the Kremlin on the top-secret British-American atom bomb project as early as 1941. Truman was not briefed on it until April 1945, shortly after he was sworn in as president."

Yet when President Roosevelt had been warned about subversives in his midst, he literally laughed it off. Still, this infiltration was no joke — as evidenced by, among others, Harry Dexter White in the

Treasury Department and Harry Hopkins as FDR's right hand.

Romerstein and Breindel devote an entire chapter to the ways that White helped set U.S. policy to benefit the Soviets. Officially the Assistant Treasury Secretary to Henry Morgenthau, White's influence made him the *de facto* secretary. It was he who authored the infamous Morgenthau Plan, essentially Stalin's scheme for the pastoralization of Germany.

The FBI had informed the Truman White House of at least 30 separate sources, including wiretap evidence, that supported the espionage case against White. But Truman tossed the proof aside and named White as executive director of the International Monetary Fund (where, as might be expected, he appointed additional Reds). *The Venona Secrets* exposes more, including details about Operation Snow, the Soviet manipulation of U.S. strategic policy by using White as an "agent of influence."

Even more than White, Harry Hopkins was assuredly a major-league agent. Author Robert Sherwood once wrote that Hopkins was "generally regarded as a sinister figure, a backstairs intriguer, an Iowan combination of Machiavelli, Svengali and Rasputin." This from a puff biographer!

Both friendly and critical biographers acknowledge that Hopkins, who lived in the personal quarters of the White House, became the most powerful man in FDR's Administration, progressing from his early role in managing national relief operations, to conducting a political purge of recalcitrant conservative Democrats, to becoming a confi-

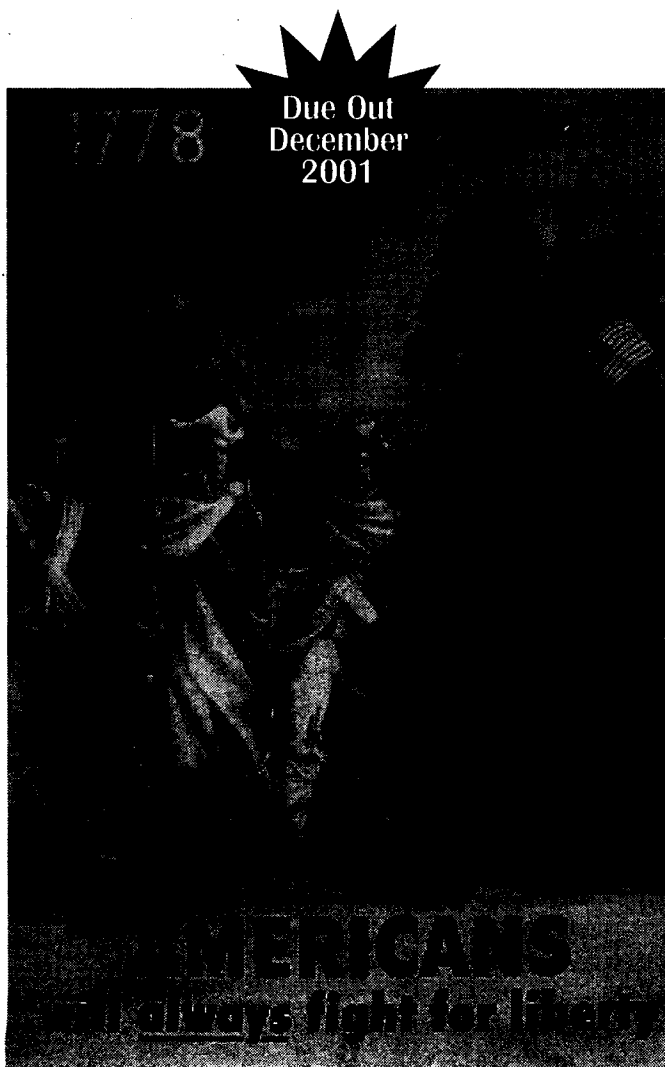
dant of Churchill's and an intermediary with Stalin. President Roosevelt once commented that "Harry and Uncle Joe got on like a house afire. They have become buddies." And why not? Hopkins even ridiculed the notion that Stalin was a Communist.

While some who have studied the Venona documents grant Hopkins generous historical wiggle room as an "unconscious" agent, Romerstein and Breindel conclude that FDR's alter ego was a Soviet spy with many comrades in the administration.

As good as *The Venona Secrets* is, one wishes the authors hadn't tried so hard not to offend "respectable" opinion. Why go so easy on Harry Truman, for example? While Truman would compare Republicans to fascists for exposing corruption in his administration, he could also gush, after meeting with the Soviet dictator at Potsdam, that, "Stalin is as near like Tom Pendergast as any man I know," comparing the mass murderer with his old mentor, the boss of the Kansas City political machine.

Despite some flaws, however, *The Venona Secrets* does paint a precise, vivid, and decidedly ugly picture of what Moscow's agents were able to accomplish within the United States. Refreshingly, the spies are not shown as misguided dissenters or confused reformers but as deliberate agents of an evil enemy. Treachery deserves no less.

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William P. Hoar is an author, magazine columnist, and managing editor of Periscope, the U.S. Naval Institute military database.



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